# A Study of the Selected African-American and Indian Novelists Dealing with the Weaker Sections of Society

**A SYNOPSIS**

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I find my own

Small person

A standing of self

Against the world

An equality of wills

I finally understand (Walker 17-22)

An emotion of self respect and resistance to inequality and injustice towards women is shared by Alice Walker in the above lines.

Women have been standing at the crossroads for centuries. Their existence has been, by and large, peripheral. They have been treated as 'other' and have been dependent on men for their survival. Both the sexes have never shared equal identity in any sphere of life in the world. Women have gained only that what men have been willing to grant. They have been subjected to gross neglect, suppression, violence and hatred. A sense of inferiority has always been a cause of mental turmoil and sufferings of women, physical as well as mental exploitation has been a part of their life.

Women have been suffering since ages on the basis of race, caste, culture, religion and gender discrimination. They are the victims of dual oppression due to orthodox and dogmatic social norms. Gender inequalities as a result of patriarchal system have crushed the very identity of women. As such, they have been deprived of their basic rights. Jasbir Jain marks her views on the condition of women in the following words, "In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth, to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent." (Jasbir Jain 210)

Women are marginalized not only in cultural beliefs, but have also been oppressed and exploited through political, economic, social and physical forms of power. In the contemporary India, cases of abduction, rape and kidnapping involving women are frequently reported to the police every hour. In Australia, the first national survey of sexual harassment has recently found that more than one in four women has been harassed at work.

Women are expected to deal with the frustrations and anger of husband's and children. Married women do have separate identity neither in their own eyes nor in the eyes of others. Many women financially depend on their husbands' families. Mostly, women are killed, injured or physically attacked in their own families.

Although literacy rate around the world has been increasing, yet it also remains the case, that majority of the world's illiterate population is of women. In 2000, Africa and Asia had the highest illiteracy rate in the world. Ignoring their commitment to work and sense of seniority, they are even paid less than men in various parts of the world. It compels them to remain confined to domestic labour and childcare. They also have no direct access to political power besides being subject to physical, emotional and sexual abuses. These abuses may be in any form as, physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, rape, forced prostitution, medical negligence, female infanticide and various forms of domestic violence.

If we examine the history of the world, the condition of women in general has been that of a subalternized lot but the Black and the Dalit women have undergone the worst atrocities. The subjugation and exploitation of African-American women has its roots in racism and slavery. The miserable saga of the Blacks in America started during the seventeenth century with the forced migration of millions of Africans from the interior of the west coast of Africa. In European colonies, the enslaved Africans were sold. The Blacks were brought to America to give

service to their White masters. These Blacks were illiterate living in abject poverty. The Whites took it as a golden opportunity to exploit and rule over them. During that epoch, the Black women had to face numerous difficulties. They were used like commodities and were brought and sold for field works.

This sect of society has been treated brutally. Even today, the Black women come across numerous forms of repression that is apparent in sexism, classism and racism. They are not only suppressed by the White masters but also by their own men folk. The Whites never regard them as human beings. After the abolition of the slavery system, they were taken to the house of their White masters as domestic servants. Even, they were not considered worthy of proper medical aid owing to their strong physical built. They were even used as mules or oxen and asked to operate heavy implements and machines in the farms and the factories. They faced discrimination in various spheres of life like, jobs, education, accommodation and other living facilities. According to Hill Collins, "Black women generally perform the same work as the men which was physically demanding, economically exploitative and intellectually deadening". (Collins 60) The Whites exploited them sexually despite their hate for them on the ground of their colour.

Despite a lot of progress worldwide, a large section of the Black women is still getting the same cruel and harsh treatment at the hands of their own men. They are not safe in their homes even at the hands of close relations. Rape, molestation, physical torture and mental agony are the common phenomena of their lives. The tragedy of their life is that their own men prefer white women to them.

Like the Black women of America, the Dalit women in India also have to face the same plight. Brutal patriarchy and callous caste system within the Dalit communities are the issues that

recur in Dalit feminist discourses. The word 'Dalit' is derived from Sanskrit language which means 'grounded', 'suppressed', 'crushed' or 'broken into pieces'. In ancient times (in the Rigvedic age), Indian society was divided into fourfold caste system comprising *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya* and *Shudra* for smooth conduct of social work. During the later Vedic age, this caste system became rigid and hierarchical. In this system, *Shudras* were put at the lowest rung of the society. During this age only, they were further divided into two more sub-castes- the touchables and the untouchables. The Dalits were relegated to the lowest ebb of the society imposing upon them menial jobs like, clearing jungles, removing rubbish, animal carcasses and waste. The word 'Dalit' was first used by Joyti Rao Phule in the nineteenth century for *Shudras*- the marginalized section of society, on the basis of caste. At present, the word 'Dalit' is used for the untouchables, *the Pariahs* and the outcastes.

The Dalit women are not only exploited by the high caste men but also within their own community. They are the victims of triple oppression - class, caste and gender. They are deprived of their basic rights. They are not allowed to fetch water from the wells. Even temple premises are kept away from their shadows. On the other hand, they are sexually harassed by high caste men and their own men also treat them shabbily lending them nothing but beating and insult.

The Dalit women are an object of regular domestic and social violence physical as well as mental. They face domestic violence in the forms of verbal abuse, sexual abuse and are frequently raped by their husbands and other family members. Many of them are also forced in the trade of prostitution just to earn money for the dullard husbands. Their girls are married at a very tender age that causes various problems related to their health.

Literature in general and fiction in particular has always served as the best medium to articulate one's voice. Many writers, social activists and political thinkers have raised their voice

against different types of oppression. In the works of the Afro-American women writers, we can perceive the worst state of the Black women in America. Authors like Zora Neal Huston, Maya Angelau, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Margret Walker have focused on the Black women's affliction and exploitation in the Afro-American society. The Dalit Literature is also the literature of the oppressed class. It focuses on the affairs of social, economic, political, cultural and religious status of the Dalits. In the Dalit Literature, the issue of the Dalit women consciousness has been projected through the Dalit female and male writers. The autobiography of Urmila Pawar' *Aaydan* (2003) and Baby Kamble's *Jeena Amucha* (1990) are considered as the mirror of the Dalit society and its consciousness. They refer to the patriarchal society within and outside the Dalit community. Baburao Bagul's *'Murali'* (Devdasi) depicts the exploitation of the deprived women.

Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Bama, P.Sivakami, the authors chosen to carry out the proposed study, write in two different tongues. They belong to different geographical regions, different cultures, different backgrounds and yet with the same maxim. Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones write in English and Bama and Sivakami, in Tamil. In spite of linguistic differences, one thing that binds them together is their very feminine sensibility about the oppressed women which they represent in their works

Toni Morrison was born in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio to Ramah (Nee willis) and George Wofford. She is an Afro-American novelist and her novels are recognized for her microscopic scrutiny of characters, epic themes and an assortment of dialogues. Her best novels are *The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon, Beloved,* and *Sula.* She won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1988 for *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize in 1993. Being an Afro-American writer, she raises the issues related to the Black community under oppression.

*The Bluest Eye* embodies the plight of the Black community of America especially its women. The story revolves round a little black girl, Pecola Breedoove. Because of her parents' negligence, she goes to the state of alienation from where she never returns. Because of black colour, she becomes a subject of racial discrimination in the society. Pecola's father makes her pregnant in his lust. She is alienated physically and mentally from the society as also from her family. Pauline, the mother of Pecola, believes her unworthy and ugly. She has inherited this sense of ugliness from her ancestors. Pecola has to work in a White's house where she is the victim of such forces and has to face the problem of inferiority.

In *Beloved* Toni Morrison represents the horrific effects of slavery. The black women are shown as victims of slavery, American racism, maltreatment, exploitation, rape and subjugation. Being treated as animals, millions of women bear the scars of slavery on their bodies with embittered souls. Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, killed her baby daughter to save her from the slavery system and justified her act saying, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe". (Morrison 16) She did not want her daughter to face the same troubles as she had suffered in her life. After her release from prison when Sethe comes back to her own community, she is not accepted.

Gayl Jones, born on November 23, 1949, is an African American writer from Lexington, Kentucky. She achieved the Frances Steloff Award for Fiction. She gives the credit of her success as a writer to her mother. She got the fame through her novels, *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976) and *The Healing (1998).* Jones raises the point of sexual and racial violence imposed on the Black women and throws light on their sufferings through her fiction.

In *Corrigidora,* the protagonist, Ursa Corregidora, was raped and enslaved by a slave owner in Brazil. Her forefathers also had to accept it as their lot of suffering with slavery,

brutality, violence and incest. Taking it as the personal loss, she has to bear the weight of her family stories concerning her grandmother's and great-grandmother's lives as prostitutes in Brazil. She also faces the violence at home because of her husband's ill treatment, she has to undergo the pain of miscarriage, that causes her infertility.

In *Eva's Man*, Jones represents the existence of Eva Medina Canada. In the beginning, the reader finds Eva in a prison for killing her lover, Davis Carter. Her past illustrates the life of relentless sexual abuses. Fraddy, a neighbourhood boy, Tyrone, the lover of his mother and her cousin, all the men molest her physically. The men whom she encounters, regard her as a sexual property. If she refuses, she is beaten by them. Her lover, keeps her locked inside the room and comes only to satisfy his physical urge. It affects her psyche and under her mental turmoil, she kills him.

Bama, the first Tamil Dalit woman novelist, was born in 1958 as Faustina Mary Fatima in a Roman catholic family from Puthupatti village in the Madras state. She has three novels to her credit, *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994), and *Vanmam* (2002) and two collections of short stories, *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum- Erumaiyum* (2003). She is called the pioneer of the Dalit Feminism. Bama raises her voice against caste and gender discrimination. Bama got fame with her first autobiographical novel *Karukk*u for which she was awarded the Crossword Book Award in 2000. She also laid the foundation of a Dalit school in Uttiramerur.

*Karukku*, her first autobiographical novel, was published in 1992. She was ostracized from her parish for writing this piece of work. The novel is based on painful memories, disdain, and pathetic state of life and culture of people where women are an object of sexual harassment and physical oppression and several other abuses. In *Karukku*, Bama gives a potrayal of the atrocities caused by gender discrimination, and consideration of caste and class. The Dalits are

not allowed to mix up and live with the villagers of the upper castes. They are pushed to the outer side of the village and treated as dirt. Their women are the worst sufferers in this game of social discrimination.

*Sangati Events* by Bama revolves round the theme of the wretched condition of the Dalit women because of caste discrimination and patriarchy. The novel focuses on the distinct images of girl childhood, which is signified by double imposed burden of caste and gender. The girls are denied to play with other children. Pathima, the young protagonist of the novel, scrutinizes each and every kind of discrimination which has been perpetrated on her and other women due to their gender and caste and internalizes all the incidents. This state leaves an indelible impression on her psyche. Maikkanni is a small girl who has to work hard as a labour when her mother is about to give birth to a baby. After the birth of the baby, she also has to take care of the new born baby besides other household work.

Palanimuthu Sivakami, born in 1957, is a celebrated Tamil Dalit woman writer. An IAS officer, she has emerged as a celebrated novelist and represents the life of the Dalit women who have to suffer a lot owing to their caste and gender. The publication of her novel *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum,* brought her into the glare of media hype. It fascinated large audience and was highly praised far and wide when decoded into English by Sivakami herself under the title *The Grip of Change* in 2006.Her other famous works are *Anandayee* and *Karukkuvettu.* She outperformed the literary development and added a new work of genius to Dalit Literature or Dalit Feminist literary ritual in Tamil. Along with this, she has also been associated with the revision of a monthly Dalit Literary magazine *Pudia Kodangi* since1995. For her short film *Ooodaha,* she was awarded the President Award in 1995.

In, *The Grip of Change*, Thangam is a meagre widow who suffers for being a Dalit. She is a victim in her own community besides the sufferings hurled upon her by others too. She has to counter triple menace of caste discrimination, economic tyranny and gender subordination and is mercilessly gripped in the patriarchal system. She is abused, raped and beaten by her caste men and the so called upper caste Hindus. The land of her husband's share is not given to her by her brother-in –law because she is childless. Kathamuthu, an ex-panchayat leader takes her under his control to exploit her physically. Her subjugated and broken body is unable to shield her.

Her next novel *Taming of Women* also harps on the theme of the suffering of such women. Periyanna, the protagonist, is not satisfied with his earnings from agriculture. He is hungry of power that can only be achieved by money. His treatment is very tyrannical with the women in his life –be she his wife, his old mother, his daughter and many other women. In the beginning, when his wife Anandhayi gives birth to a baby, he is enjoying with another woman at home. Anandhayi is well aware of her husband's physical relationship with the woman. Ignoring this fact, she only wants the other women not to come to her home so as to avoid their evil effect her growing daughter.

So, we find that both the Black and the Dalit women have been deprived of their political, social and economic rights because of their gender, race and caste. There are some issues which are common to both women belonging to both the classes. They suffer in different ways, i.e., molestation, sexual harassment, gender bias, etc. If we analyse Bama and Shivkami, we find some similar points in both of them. They focus on the Dalit women. They bring forth the issues of patriarchy and gross gender discrimination in Dalit communities. All the four writers advocate the cause of women through social activism as well. Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones also portray the subjugation and repression of women in their works. But there are some dissimilarities also

among these writers. Bama and P. Sivakami do not have a rich literary legacy. Bama started writing at a personal crisis while P. Sivakami comes from a fine background. But the issue of caste is the particular phenomenon of the life of the Dalit women. On the other hand, racism has been the part of the Black women's life. Bama's works are the refection of her own life. While Sivakami's field work experience as an IAS officer gives strength to her writings. Through her novels, she depicts the sexualized and subjugated body of the Dalit women. On the other hand, Morrison's novels project the traumatic conditions under which African –Americans had to live. In her novels, she represents the life of the Black women who are physically and mentally tortured at the hands of the Whites as well as the Black men. Gayl Jones also depicts the lives of the Black women through her outstanding works. Her works represent the psyche of the Black women who are the victims of slavery, sexual abuses and traditional atrocities.

Thus we see that these authors of both the countries have excelled in portraying the oppression of women in their respective countries. All the writers are still articulating the agonies of women through their works and social activism. It is hoped that the deep study of Indian and Afro-American novelists with regard to the suppression of women, will open new vistas of research.

Therefore, the objectives of the study are;

a. To make a thorough study of the contemporary socio-political milieus of the respective countries.
b. To investigate the factors responsible for the plight of the Dalit and the Black women.
c. To closely study the socio- political surroundings that shaped up the authors' psyches and coloured their themes.

d. To critically examine the theme of plight and predicament of women in the selected novels of the four writers.

e. To make a comprehensive study of the language of oppression of women in the selected novels of these writers.

f. To make a comparative study of the four writers with reference to the exploitation and sufferings of women in their selected novels.

CHAPTERIZATION

1. Introduction:

(a)The Contemporary Socio-Political Milieus

(b) Making of the Novelists

2. Structures of Domination

3. Oppression of Women in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones (*The Bluest Eye, Beloved, Corrigidora, Eva's Man)*

4. Oppression of Women in the Novels of Bama and P.Sivakami (*Karukku, Sangati:Events,The Grip of Change, Taming of Women*)

5. The Narrative of Female Oppression:

(a) Broad Pattern of Oppression

(b) Directions of Change

(c) Present Status

6. Conclusion

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